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ABSTRACT

The responses of some 30 two-year colleges in the northeastern United States to a 13-item questionnaire survey relating to percentage of responses for various types of mail questionnaires are summarized. Results of the survey show that maximum returns might be anticipated from a forced-choice questionnaire among identified administrators, with higher returns from females than males within the 25-40 age group, obtained between the months of October-December. Faculty was found to be the second most responsive group, with "professional colleagues" third and students fourth. On the average, parents, alumni, and males respond only about half of the time to mail questionnaires. A number of responses indicated that persistent follow-ups are necessary. An example of precision follow-up by one survey respondent is included. (This paper might be of help to those who conduct or plan to conduct mailed surveys.) (DB)

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(VIII)

Capstone Survey
(Mail Questionnaire Returns)

During November 1972 a sample of 40 two-year colleges in northeastern United States were invited to participate in a brief questionnaire survey relating to percentage of responses for various types of mail questionnaires.

Within two-months, some 30, or three-quarters, replied. Their responses are summarized as follows:

What is your usual return (percentage response) for the following types of mail questionnaires? (All percentages reported are averages unless otherwise noted.)

1. Among alumni = 54%. Range = 10-90%
2. From parents = 55%. Range = 10-90%
3. From students = 60%. Range = 10-95%
4. Professional colleagues = 68%. Range 35-100%
5. Your faculty = 72%. Range = 20-100%
6. Your administrators = 90%. Range = 70-100%
7. Others (one each):-
   - Industry = 20% (invitations to seminars, special courses, etc.)
   - Professional employers = 90%
   - High schools (occupational interests) = 60%
   - High schools (guidance personnel opinionaires) = 85%
   - Employer feasibility studies (manpower needs) = 50%
   - Applicants (non-acceptors) = 70%
8. Anonymous = 36%. Range 5-95%
   versus identified respondents = 79%. Range = 40-100%
9. With postage paid return envelopes = 68%. Range = 50-95%
   versus Without = 33%. Range = 5-50%
10. From male respondents = 50%. Range = 20-70%
    versus Female respondents = 60%. Range = 35-80%
11. By type of questionnaire:
    a) Forced-choice responses = 66%. Range = 35-90%
    b) Unstructured, open-ended, narrative response = 30%. Range = 5-60%
    c) Reporting historical, head-count, demographic data = 48%. Range = 15-80%
12. From age groups:
    a) Below 25 years = 59%. Range 10-95%
    b) 25-40 years = 51%. Range 30-90%
    c) Over 40 years = 48%. Range 10-90%

As one respondent noted - "there appears to be an inverse relationship between age and percentage of response.

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13. Time of Year
    a) Jan-March = 47%. Range = 10-80%
    b) April-June = 44%. Range = 5-80%
    c) July-Sept. = 42%. Range = 10-90%
    d) Oct.-Dec. = 51%. Range = 20-90%

The customary one-in-the-crowd iconoclast offered the following comment: "Your guess is as good as mine. The usual % of pesty questionnaires that I answer is 0%." Too bad our limited-vision 'friend' is not identified so that we can offer hir(him/her?) the same 'cooperation' when s(he) next asks for help!

Scanning the above 'results', variability is the single, overriding characteristic. Administrators apparently return the highest percentages of questionnaires, averaging 90%; and unstructured, open-ended narrative responses evidently yield the least returns, averaging only 30%.

One respondent observed: - "I've found these factors are so interrelated that people respond if:

1 - you convince them (if they don't know), that their response is needed; will lead to action, and is topical.
2 - It's as short as possible - reasonable options to forced choice items and room for write-in explanations.
3 - It's easy to return - postage paid."

Another commented:- "there has been much variability in returns. If we follow up and follow-up, we get excellent results, particularly with alumni!"

One other noted:- "I can predict fairly well for certain groups and certain types of forms. My main variables have been: (1) number of pages, (2) number of questions, (3) length of questions, (4) closed vs open-ended, (5) kind of appeal presented in introduction."

As an example of precision follow-up, one respondent included the following statement:

"In an attempt to increase our return rate, a phone follow-up of non-respondents was conducted between January 15 and February 2, 1972. Prior to these attempts, 1258 respondent questionnaires of a total 3378 potential respondent questionnaires had been received, representing a 37-22 percent return. The amount of man hours spent on the follow-up and its affect on the return rate are presented below:

There were 1908 phone calls attempted, with 1104 actual connections made. The connections are broken down as follows: 364 potential respondents requested that new questionnaires be forwarded; 270 potential respondents agreed to return the original questionnaire; and 470 potential respondents were not at home (420) or refused to assist in the study (50). There were 804 non-connections broken down as follows: 683 busy signals or no answers; and 121 wrong numbers.

Of the 634 potential respondents who either agreed to return their original questionnaires or requested another questionnaire be forwarded, 219 actually responded (34-54 percent return rate by those who agreed to respond). The number of returned questionnaires increased from 1258 (37-22%) to 1477 (43.72%), representing an increase in the overall return rate of 6.5%.

Twenty-six phone calls were made each hour, fourteen connections and twelve non-connections. The average time spent per connection was three minutes; the average time spent per non-connection was one and a half minutes. Overall, fifty-five hours were spent on connections and twenty-one hours on non-connections."

Rank-ordered in descending average-percentages of response, this northeastern sample of 30 two-year colleges reports the following, (excluding the single-items, "Other" category:- 7 above)

1st - 90% "Your administrators"
2nd - 79% "Identified respondents"
3rd - 72% "Your faculty"
4th - 68% "Professional colleagues"
5th - 68% "With postage paid envelopes"
6th - 66% "Forced-choice responses"
7th - 60% "Female respondents"
8th - 60% "From students"
9th - 59% "Below 25 years"
10th - 55% "From parents"
11th - 54% "Among alumni"
12th - 51% "25 - 40 years"
13th - 51% "Oct.-Dec."
14th - 50% "From male respondents"
15th - 48% "Over 40 years"
16th - 48% "Reporting historical data"
17th - 47% "Jan-March"
18th - 44% "April-March"
19th - 42% "July-Sept."
20th - 36% "Anonymous"
21st - 33% "Without postage envelopes"
22nd - 30% "Unstructured, open-ended."

Based upon the above information, maximum returns might be anticipated from a forced-choice questionnaire among identified administrators, with higher returns from females than males within the 25-40 year age-group, obtained between the months of October-December. Faculty follow closely as the second most responsive group, with "professional colleagues" third and students fourth most responsive. On the average, parents, alumni, and males respond only about half the time to mail questionnaires.

And finally, it is to be noted that numerous respondents indicated that persistent follow-ups, both by mail and telephone, are needed to achieve the percentages reported.

Sincere thanks to all who took time to respond.

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